

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 312. Reagan, Iran-Contra and the Cold War

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MacPlant, new and only at McDonald's.

It's morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980.

Nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years.

This afternoon, 6,500 young men and women will be married. And with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future.

It's morning again in America. And under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better.

Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?

Oh, heartwarming stuff there, Dominic Sandbrook. You very much wanted to open with that, which was the famous reelection advert for Reagan in the 1984 election.

Four years, of course, after he won against Jimmy Carter. And it's interesting, listening to that, how he's still playing off against the memories of the Carter presidency.

Four years ago.

Why would you want to go back to a time before morning when all is dark and gloomy and miserable and people aren't getting married and people aren't kind of hugging each other and raising flags and all that kind of stuff which is going on in the advert?

It's probably one of the most famous American ads of all time. Most famous ads tend to be negative. So the ad that Lyndon Johnson ran against Goldwater in 1964, the year that Reagan first really got involved with politics.

That's the one with the little girl blowing the flower and then she gets nuked.

Exactly, the nuclear weapons, the Daisy advert. But this is unusually being a very famous advert that's as positive. And actually, as a British historian, you know, you watch that advert and the sense of being immersed in an enormous vat of syrup.

Drowning.

It's hard to resist, but it's absolutely the key to Reaganism. The emphasis on the family, the emphasis on the flag, on being stronger, prouder, stronger, better. The sort of Hollywood sheen.

And the Hollywood sheen is something that is part of the Reagan's presidency right from the beginning and it kicks off in his inauguration after his victory in 1980.

So we ended last time, didn't we, by talking about how there was a real sense of, I mean, Jimmy Carter had talked of a malaise in 1979. The Americans had left Vietnam in 1973. Saigon fell in 75.

The Iranian hostage crisis, high inflation, rising unemployment, a real sense of the American dream having kind of lost its way.

So they go together in the limousine from the White House, Carter and Reagan. Carter, it's so richly symbolic. I mean, you said before we started recording this, that so much of it feels like it's people have been supplied by a Hollywood casting agency.

The lines have been written by the most melodramatic scriptwriter. And Carter has literally been up all night trying to get the hostages out of Iran. He is haggard, exhausted. He hasn't shaved until the very last minute.

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He throws on his suit. He gets in the limo with Reagan and Carter. He's stricken. He is a stricken man. And he says nothing. And Reagan tries to lighten the mood by telling him jokes about Hollywood.

Well, there's a great, there's a great joke, isn't there, about what is flat and glows in the dark. Tehran, the day after Reagan's inauguration.

Oh, right. Golly. Yeah. Well, but the thing is, then Reagan gets up there and he gives this inaugural address, which is very, very, it absolutely sets the tone. And he tells a story about a young man. He looks at Arlington Cemetery, which you can kind of not really see, but just see in the distance there in the distance, National Cemetery.

And he says row on row of white markers. He tells the story of one man who lies under these markers, Martin Trepto, who was killed in 1917 in the First World War.

And on his body was found a diary with the words he'd written, my pledge in it. This pledge said, America must win this war. I will work. I will save.

I will sacrifice. I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.

Reagan tells that story and he says, you know, we are called upon to try to live up to that, to believe that we, like Martin Trepto and Coke, can resolve our challenges with God's help.

And he ends his final sentence. After all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans. And it is so stirring and rousing. The thing is, it wasn't true.

His speechwriter had said to him, I don't think we should use this because, first of all, he's not buried in National Cemetery. So the whole conceit is not true.

And secondly, he probably wasn't the first person to write that pledge. He was probably writing down something that he had heard.

East Coast liberals with their tedious facts.

His scriptwriter, Ken Kachigian, who says that to him and Reagan says to him, it's too good a story. So they leave it in.

Right. And so that's the essence, isn't it? Because, I mean, it's not a kind of a barefaced lie. Well, I suppose it is to a degree, but I mean, it's not like the kind of Trump saying a million people turned up when it was about, you know, 10.

It's Reagan's understanding of what is true.

Yes.

The kind of the mere historical details are as nothing compared to the radiance of the message that it teaches, I guess would be Reagan's perspective on it.

Exactly, exactly. We talked in the previous episode about his use of parables, sort of metaphorical stories that express the kind of truth.

When Reagan, I mean, we're jumping ahead, but why not?

When he's in trouble with Iran Contra, he gives this absolutely extraordinary speech where he says, I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages.

My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true.

But the facts and evidence tell me that it's not.

And I think that's the essence of Reagan, that if his heart tells him something is true, then it kind of is true.

So there's that.

But the other thing is that the inauguration right from the start is a gigantic blowout.

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So a lot of the events that Carter's inauguration had been free and he had walked hand in hand with his wife Rosalind from the White House to the Capitol or vice versa.

I can't remember which because he wanted to show that he was a man of the people.

Reagan realizes that ultimately Americans don't want that, that actually, for all the talk of the Republic, they want a king, they want a monarch and he's brilliant at playing a king.

So he and Nancy are in absolutely all their finery.

You pay something like, is it \$10,000?

I think it's \$10,000 for a box at Frank Sinatra's gala on the night of the inauguration.

Right, but he can do this because it's saying a way that somebody like Trump can't.

I mean, Trump does do it, but it kind of causes more offense.

Because the glamour of Hollywood is something that people want to invest in.

Yeah.

And movie stars, you know, should have limousines and fur coats and all that kind of stuff.

Yes.

So although there was some disquiet about Nancy and she becomes the lightning rod for...

Queen Nancy.

Queen Nancy and people, I mean, the famous example is when on the same day that the federal government classifies tomato ketchup as a vegetable, there's a cost-cutting exercise in school lunches.

She announces that she's just spent \$209,000 on China for the White House with the monogram in R.

It's all.

So she's completely tone deaf.

You know, she makes Mary Antoinette look in touch with the streets.

But Reagan himself, people quite like that in a president.

So Reagan, unlike Carter, Reagan says, I will never be photographed in my shirt sleeves in the Oval Office.

I will always be wearing a suit and tie.

I will never dress down.

Because he's playing a part.

Exactly.

And he plays the part brilliantly.

And I guess the evidence for just how well he can play it is the courage and the capacity for recovery that he shows after he's shot.

Yeah.

A few weeks after the inauguration.

Yes.

Not even two months, exactly right.

Rawhide Down.

So Rawhide is his code name for the security services.

He was at the Hilton in Washington, D.C., talking to building construction union members.

And he leaves the hotel that afternoon through the VIP entrance and then on T Street.

So it's not that far from the White House, really.

Tick shots ring out.

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His press secretary is very badly hit, Jim Brady, hits in the head and ends up in a wheelchair and a policeman is hit.

And Reagan at first, it's not clear that he's been hit, is it?

No.

So he's bundled into this limo by the Secret Service.

He thinks that the person bundling him in has crushed a rib.

Yeah.

They rushed to the George Washington Hospital.

And Reagan, I was astounded when I...

Because I had not really read a sort of hour-by-hour reconstruction of the assassination.

But he walks into the hospital, doesn't he, under his own name?

Could I recommend a very good Rawhide Down by Del Quentin Wilbur, who I met at a literary festival in Palm Springs?

So the thing that strikes me about it is that it's a very dramatic incident.

But all the characters and all the dialogue in it make it even more dramatic.

So one of the anesthetist nurses says about the two doctors who first come when Reagan walks in, if you were to call central casting and say,

send me two guys who are really nice folks and look like they might be surgeons, these are the two they would send.

They have to cut all Reagan's suit off so he's absolutely naked.

And then they're kind of feeling around and they discover that there is, in fact, this bullet that he has to be operated on.

The surgeon comes in, he's going to operate him.

Reagan famously says, I hope you're a Republican and the surgeon who is, in fact, a card-carrying Democrat says that today, sir, we are all Republicans.

Perfect dialogue.

Absolutely perfect lines.

Reagan recovers, Nancy comes in, Reagan says, honey, I forgot to duck.

Yeah.

He cannot stop talking.

The nurse who's obviously kind of channeling Jane Wyman, who was fed up with how much Reagan was always talking,

says, Mr. President, in the most polite way I can tell you, when I put this face cloth over your eyes, it means I want you to shut up.

Is he telling her stories about things he's read in the Reader's Digest?

Tipo Neal, who is the Democrat speaker, very ideologically opposed to what Reagan is doing.

He comes in, kneels by Reagan's bed, recites at one of the Psalms.

I mean, the whole thing is so kind of perfectly scripted.

And then adding a kind of a dark perspective on that, it turns out that the guy who has shot Reagan, John Hinckley,

is obsessed with a movie star in the form of Jodie Foster, and he's trying to impress her.

Because he's seen her in a film about an assassination taxi driver.

And taxi driver itself, the character of taxi driver, Robert De Niro's character, is based on Arthur Bremer, who shot George Wallace.

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Yeah, so it's just kind of halls of mirrors. And Roy Hyde-Dan also suggests that the Hinckley has been influenced by Mark David Chapman, who shot John Lennon just a few months before. And so the sense of celebrity, of movies, of political drama,

I mean, it's an incredible hall of mirrors like that. And Reagan comes out of it very well, doesn't he? He does.

I mean, he's in his early 70s by this point, but he's a very fit man.

He's back up on his feet pretty soon.

Is that within less than two weeks? I think that sense of playing a part, which is so easily derided, is an absolutely central part of his political appeal.

I mean, we talked about this a little bit when we did our podcast about French presidents.

The French electorate reward a president who plays the part of the monarchical president, which Macron does, which Mitterrand did, or de Gaulle.

And I think FDR did that as president.

Well, it's a difference between a prime minister and a president, isn't it?

Absolutely, it is.

Reagan is always conscious that he's playing the president.

Although his policies are often very divisive, he tries to speak for all Americans.

He talks a lot about America, about what it means to be American.

He never lets his guard down. He never pokes fun at his own role.

There's no hint of absurdity about him, of sort of raised eyebrow.

No.

He thinks the American presidency is charged with dignity and meaning and a sort of, dare I say, sacral importance.

Well, there is a kind of civil religion, American civil religion, I suppose you would say.

And for Reagan, literal religion.

Yeah.

I mean, he literally sees his role in terms of good and evil, which brings us to one of the two great themes, I suppose, of his first presidency.

So the first is the Cold War.

Yeah.

And the second is the economy.

Well, maybe we should start with economy.

Okay.

Because even as Reagan is being shot and then recovering, the economy is in trouble.

It is.

So he's come to power with, it's not quite the same as Thatcherism.

People always think it's the same as Thatcherism, but it isn't.

It's a doctrine called supply-side economics.

Or voodoo economics, as George Bush, who had been Reagan's opponent in the primaries and then becomes his vice president, had to put it.

Exactly.

So supply-side, the essence of supply-side, I mean, we could spend hours discussing this, but the essence of it is,

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you cut taxes, you lift regulations, you make life easier for business, and that will help the economy to recover.

And in fact, there was a famous curve called the Laffer curve that an economist called Arthur Laffer had drawn on a napkin in a Washington restaurant, which he said, if you cut taxes enough, you will reach a point where the economy grows so much that your tax revenues will actually go up.

Trickle down economics.

Yeah.

This has never quite been reached in reality.

But it's great if you're rich.

Yeah, it's great if you're rich.

In fact, a lot of conservative economists at the time and ever since have said, this is utter tosh.

That's a classic Reagan-style parable, actually.

It kind of lodges in people's minds, the idea that there's this curve on a napkin.

Yeah.

And people love that.

So Reagan has this budget director, a very young man called David Stockman, he's 34, he's very idealistic.

He says, listen, let's slash taxes.

So they're going to bring down the top rates of tax from 70% to 50%.

They're going to cut taxes in general, 23% in three years, a massive tax cut.

And we'll also cut spending.

And actually, the key to how Reaganomics works in practice is they cut the taxes and then Stockman says, right, now for the spending.

They cut the easy things, easy for Republicans.

So they cut things like welfare for the working poor, food stamps, school lunches.

Because they're all just going out and blowing all their food stamps on enormous amounts of food in shops.

This is the Reagan take.

That's the Reagan take.

Exactly.

They say, well, we'll cut all that.

And of course, they can cut them because that's not really the Republican constituency.

That's as a low hanging fruit.

Then they say, what about Stockman's like, well, what about social security?

Oh, no, you can't cut that.

And then he discovers, oh, we're also going to have a massive increase in defense spending.

So they increase defense spending from just over 20% of spending to almost 30%.

Take it right back up to where it was in the Vietnam War when they're actually fighting a war.

By the end of that first year, Stockman gives an interview to the Atlantic Monthly in which he says, actually, this great plan hasn't really worked out at all because I've realized that the administration is not prepared to cut spending.

They're actually what Reagan's going to do.

He's going to cut taxes and just borrow money to spend on defense.

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In essence, this is what happens.

So 1982, the deficit is \$128 billion.

And by 1983, it's already gone up to \$207 billion by far the greatest peacetime deficits in American history.

So this is what makes it different from Mrs. Thatcher.

Mrs. Thatcher is very much, she really believes in kind of a balanced budget.

She, in fact...

Housekeeping.

Yeah, good housekeeping.

She, in fact, raises taxes when she gets into trouble because she's all about cutting borrowing.

Reagan borrows money like there's no tomorrow.

Which he can kind of afford to do because the dollar is the reserve currency.

Right, because the American economy is so strong.

So that's the difference between Ronald Reagan and Liz Truss, for instance.

Yes, well, Liz Truss, you see, Liz Truss in Britain wanted to kind of reproduce Reaganomics.

And even at the time, people said, yeah, but it doesn't work that way for Britain.

The Americans can get away with this, with this gigantic economy and their outsized role in the world.

But we can't.

Now, meanwhile, the head of the Federal Reserve, Paul Volcker, who'd been appointed by under Jimmy Carter,

he is really interested in fighting inflation.

So he has increased interest rates, hit a peak of 20% in December of 1981.

Everybody listening to this can probably guess what happens if you have high interest rates.

It's very expensive to borrow money.

You get a massive recession.

So the economy goes into recession, 81, 82, 3 million jobs are lost.

A lot of those in the kind of rust belt.

And those are jobs often that don't return.

So if you're in Detroit, if you're in Michigan, if you're in, I don't know, Pennsylvania or Ohio or somewhere,

and you're in a factory town, these are the places that really suffer in the Reagan years.

Flint.

Flint, Michigan.

Yeah, Michael Moore did a program, didn't he, about Flint, Michigan?

I mean, these are places that have been, you know, the backbone.

The engine room.

Of FDRs America.

And Reagan, the great disciple of the great enthusiast.

Exactly.

FDR is destroying it.

Yes.

I mean, you could argue, I think you could argue quite reasonably, this is a world that is doomed anyway,

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because of globalization, but Reagan, not as much as Mrs. Thatcher in Britain, but to some extent, Reagan becomes the kind of the face of it, the face of that change. And I think what makes it so charged in the United States, doesn't quite have the same resonance in Britain,

is that the Reagan administration is so glitzy.

Yeah.

And that at the same time that this is happening, Nancy is buying on a new China and wearing expensive dresses,

and there's that contrast is so marked.

So how do they go from the recession and this ballooning deficit to being able to say it's morning in America,

and all these great statistics and...

Well, first of all, they don't mention the deficit in the morning again in America advert, but the deficit continues throughout the 1980s.

So they're skating over that?

They skate over that, and it's actually not till George Bush, who has to raise taxes, and then Bill Clinton in the 1990s, they start to basically eliminate that deficit.

The unemployment rate peaks at about 11% at the end of 82, similar to Britain, similar rate.

But then there's a huge boom, and that doesn't really have a British.

There is a bit of a boom in Britain, but it's much bigger in America.

What is stimulating the boom?

I know we're trying to pack so much into this podcast.

So I'm going to have to try to really boil it down.

I think it depends who you ask, Tom.

So it depends on their politics.

So a liberal economist, somebody like Paul Krugman, would say that boom is coming anyway.

It's part of the business cycle.

Actually, what Reagan is doing is needed.

There was always going to be a recession in the early 80s.

He's surfing the boom.

This is inevitably going to come because of technological change,

because of the inevitable recovery in America has actually got lots of underlying strengths.

A lot of malaise was oversold, and the economy is always going to be booming.

And also oil prices have dropped.

Now, if you're a more pro-Reagan economist, you would say the tax cuts is a big part of it.

The tax cuts means people have more money in their pockets.

Businesses can invest.

Deregulation means there's more competition.

So the deregulation, again, we're talking about how the disciple of FDR ends up inflicting all this damage on the old heartlands of the New Deal.

And the other famous policy that betrays Reagan's instinctive upbringing.

We mentioned in the previous episode that Reagan is the only president to have been a union leader.

Oh, right, yes.

He sacks all the air traffic controllers, doesn't he?

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He tells the Pacco.

Pacco is the game of the union.

So as federal employees, air traffic controllers are not allowed to go on strike.

Back dates back to the 1950s and then was reaffirmed by President Kennedy.

The air traffic controllers demand higher pay.

Obviously, as people always do in a period of inflation, high inflation,

they want more pay, but they also want better working conditions.

They're very aggrieved about their working conditions.

They say they're very stressed.

They want to move to a four-day week.

I think it is.

The federal government offers them 11.4%.

It's actually more than they're offering most federal employees, I have to say.

They say it's no good. They decide they're going to go on strike anyway.

Reagan basically says, you have 48 hours.

If you don't come back to work in 48 hours, I will fire you.

I think they don't believe him and he fires them.

Then he gets people from the military to do it.

Actually, it lays down a really potent marker that he's not going to take any grief from the unions.

He's going to do what he has to do.

Obviously, if you don't like Reagan, if you're on the left, if you're in the unions, it's seen as outrageous.

If you're on the right, you say, oh, isn't this great, bold leadership and all that sort of thing.

Interestingly, he doesn't just fire them.

They're banned from federal jobs for life.

Wow, I didn't realize that.

That was then rescinded by Clinton.

I guess a kind of similar decisiveness or headstrongness,

whatever you wanted to frame it, depending on your politics, about his foreign policy,

which is as seen from the Soviet Union, directly confrontational.

Definitely seen from Salisbury, where I grew up.

We have the NATO headquarters just that side, regional headquarters just that side, where I grew up.

News about cruise missiles and rearmament.

It's all very unsettling.

Well, again, it's a complicated story.

The Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s was stationed in new missiles called the SS-20s on its side of the Iron Curtain.

From Europe, there are calls for the US to boost its presence, so particularly West Germany and Britain.

So Reagan's policy is he believes in to borrow a goldwaterism, peace through strength.

He thinks you don't back down.

Communism is evil.

Talk softly, carry a big stick.

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Right.

He makes the very famous speech to a group of evangelicals in 83, where he says, the Soviet Union is an evil empire, the focus for evil in the modern world.

He says in an address to parliament in Britain in 1982,

the march of freedom and democracy will leave Marxism, Leninism on the ash heap of history.

That's an image that...

Ash heap is the smoldering radioactive heap of history.

And they stationed cruise missiles and Britain,

Pershing missiles in West Germany, in Italy, in Holland, and so on and so forth.

And the requester has to be said of those governments.

It's not like they're being forced to take them.

Of course.

The funny thing about Reagan in this period, in the first term, is everybody says he's a warmonger.

He wants to press the button and you said in that previous podcast...

And the famous poster, which is on the wall of every student,

has gone with the wind of Reagan and Thatcher evoking the famous image.

What does he say?

She asked him to take her to the end of the world.

He said, he'd organise it.

Something like that.

And yet, everybody got Reagan wrong.

That's the absolutely fascinating thing.

Reagan is obsessed with nuclear weapons to a degree unmatched by any other president, but he has a horror of nuclear weapons.

I mean, this will amaze a lot of listeners.

This is probably the one thing that a lot of listeners will say.

They've gone mad.

Reagan is a nuclear disarmament.

He loves the thought of getting rid of nuclear weapons.

It's one reason why he's so interested in the idea of Star Wars,

the Strategic Defense Initiative,

of a shield that will protect America with lasers in space and all this.

And his own staff say to him, it's mad.

They say it'll destroy the Western Alliance if you just have a shield just for the United States.

Their allies will be outraged.

He genuinely, we know from his diary, he genuinely lies awake at night in a sort of cold sweat about nuclear weapons.

And so this is why he, in the long run,

will pledge to offer the technology to the Soviet Union as well.

And it explains why this man who is associated,

I mean, is seen by his opponents as the epitome of a cold warrior,

a kind of gung-ho nuclear missile wielding cowboy,

why he will take the lead,

why the succession of extraordinary summits with Gorbachev.

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The long-term result of that is an incredible process of dearmament.

Yeah, we can see that, Tom, even before Gorbachev comes in.

So in October, 1983, Reagan watches *The Day After*.

Lots of our American listeners will be familiar with *The Day After*, this sort of TV movie about a nuclear holocaust.

So in Britain, the equivalent was *Threads*, which was actually much more frightening.

Reagan watched *The Day After* and he wrote in his diary that he found it depressing and chilling.

Lots of conservative commentators were saying, oh, this is left-wing propaganda.

Reagan doesn't say that at all. He says, oh, this is terrible.

Then he finds out a few weeks later that there's been a NATO war game, *Able Archer*, and that the Russians have really been terrified by this and thought it was going to be World War III.

Because that's through Gordievsky, the Soviet defector to Britain.

And Reagan writes in his diary, he says,

we ought to tell them that no one here has any intention of doing anything like that.

He says, I would love to get a top Soviet leader in a room alone and try to convince him that we had no designs on the Soviet Union and that the Russians had nothing to fear from us.

Now, that's not something that his critics would imagine him writing.

That's sort of almost slightly sort of boyish.

Yes, it is.

If only I could be in the room with them, I could persuade them.

It's the kind of thing that a very educated, sophisticated analyst of international affairs would never in a million years dare say.

Yeah.

They'd be far too cynical to say that.

Exactly.

But Reagan doesn't have that kind of background,

but he has the kind of background,

well, in the kind of ideals that good will triumph and that, you know, life is ultimately optimistic.

And his own personal charm, he thinks, if I can just get in there,

I can talk to them and I can persuade them the American way of life is better.

Yeah, if I can just show them all the swimming pools in California, which of course in the long run he will do.

Anyway, so that sets up his second term very nicely

and I think the second half of this episode.

So I think we should take a break now and when we come back, we will be into Reagan's second term.

Hey, introduce yourself to a burger with crispy buns,

crunchy salad, soft melted cheese and wonderful juicy patty.

You bite in and again until nothing is left over.

And with this irresistible McDonald's taste in your mouth,

introduce yourself.

You just ate the new Mcplant for the first time.
With juicy, plant-based patty from Beyond Meat.

Can you imagine that?

Then you can try it now.

Try Mcplant, new and only by McDonald's.

Is what you like.

Hello, welcome back.

Hello, welcome back to the Restless History.

It's 1985.

It's morning again in America, Tom.

It's morning again in America.

We're into Reagan's second term.

Are you not going to mention Walter Mondale in this podcast at all?

No, I'm not going to mention Walter Mondale.

That is shocking.

No, we're going to pass over him.

So Reagan has steamrolled at Walter Mondale
because the economy is in recovery.

Walter Mondale is a union man.

He belongs to the kind of New Deal past.

This is the famous line, isn't it,

about how he's not going to take advantage of his opponent's youth.

Brilliant, Reagan.

I mean, even if you hate Reagan, if you can't stand his boluses,

if your job is destroyed in Michigan or something,

it's hard to watch that debate

where everybody has been saying Reagan's too old.

He did a very poor performance in the first debate.

Then it comes up in debate number two and he says,

I will not make age an issue in this campaign.

I will not exploit for political purposes

my opponent's youth and an experience.

And if you watch Mondale in that,

Mondale burst out laughing.

He finds it very funny.

And Mondale himself always says,

that's the point.

I knew I could never beat him.

Yeah.

The Teflon quality.

It's a Homer.

Yes, it is a Homer.

I tell you one thing that is a definite shadow

over Reagan's record and that's AIDS.

Yes.

So AIDS becomes more and more of an issue as time goes on.

I mean, going right the way back to his governorship in California, isn't one of his key AIDS destroyed in a kind of gay sex scandal?

That's right.

No one's ever really got to the truth of that, whether it was true or whether it was just...

I mean, Reagan's AIDS always...

He's a very, very weak leader.

It's a weird thing about Reagan, actually.

He projects so much strength, but all his AIDS,

all these people who we don't have time to talk about,

Michael Deaver and Lin Noffziger and, I don't know, Ed Meese

and all these characters, Don Reagan,

they spend so much time feuding with each other

and constantly being fired, resigning, coos,

because they all say, and they all, without exception, say,

Reagan was a... He hated kind of managing people.

He hated confrontation.

He hated giving people bad news, telling people off,

all that sort of thing, which meant that his administration was something...

It's extraordinary when you read the accounts

how much of a sort of snake pit it all is,

as they're using Nancy against each other

and ganging up and making accusations on...

But anyway, yes, I got off piece there.

AIDS, there are people in the administration

who say we should speak out about this,

the power of the sort of bully pulpits.

His surgeon general, we're talking about people with amazing names,

he's called Everett Coop.

Of course he is.

And Everett Coop is a man of intense, moral,

sort of religious conservatism.

So Everett Coop, you know, is cut from...

Like I've cast the agency...

So he's not in favour of sodomy?

He is not, that's what you're saying.

He is not.

However, Everett Coop is a very amount of great integrity.

He's led by the science as it were.

And he wants the administration to support him

in a sort of public awareness campaign.

So that's, I mean, that's the interesting thing, isn't it?
Because de facto Christians could turn either way.
I mean, there could be, these are all sort of mites
and it's God's plague and all that kind of stuff.
Or this is a terrible catastrophe
and we have a moral duty.
You know, these are our citizens.
Yes, that's the Everett Coop position.
Well, okay, so I think the better of him then.
But the Reagan will not touch it.
Like with personal morality, or is that his sense
that it wouldn't play well in certain key constituencies?
I think it wouldn't play well.
I think there are aides who say you don't touch it.
Aides who are very in with the religious right.
I think Nancy is against him touching it.
So there are stories that when Rock Hudson died in October 1985,
Nancy blocked requests from Rock Hudson's publicist
for the president to help move him
to a French military hospital.
Reagan's own aides asked him to include references to aides
in the presidential addresses, isn't it?
Yeah, in the 1986 State of the Union.
And he takes it out.
And he could have done it.
The Thatcherate government in Britain,
you and I will remember, Tom, all those leaflets
and the huge campaign about...
Yes, the tombstone.
The tombstone and all the campaign about condoms
and don't die of ignorance, all this kind of thing.
The Reagan administration does nothing similar.
So that is a blot then. That's a blot.
And another blot is the state of play with Iran and...
Oh, God.
Yeah.
Nicaragua. So Dominic.
I've been dreading the appearance of this in the podcast
because it's so complicated.
Okay, well, don't go too much into the detail of it.
Do you want to try and boil it down?
Yeah.
So there are two elements. It's not a Hydra.
It's a two-headed scandal.

But the complicating thing is the two heads end up sort of eating each other.
So the first thing is the Reagan administration is absolutely obsessed with Central America. Because it's their backyard. It's their backyard.
And they're thinking the 70s, the governments of the 70s, the administration of the 70s, I mean, far too lax about the spread of communism. Central America, we make a stand. We support the government of El Salvador. There are a load of people from Nicaragua who are helping the El Salvadorians, including the government of Nicaragua, who are these people who are left-wing called the Santanistas. They decide to encourage some rebels against the Nicaraguan government, the Santanistas. And the rebels are called the Contras. And they kind of fund them. And they slightly invent the Contras. I mean, the Contras would have existed anyway, give them loads of money. Reagan creates a fantasy image of the Contras. He says they're the heirs to the founding fathers and the French resistance, which I think would be a great surprise to anybody in Nicaragua. Anyway, Congress is trying to roll back the power of what it sees as the imperial presidency. They've gone in such a mess in Vietnam. And they don't want to get into another Vietnam and Central America. So they pass two amendments, or the Boland amendments, that basically prohibits the federal government giving money to the Contras. They want to roll this back. Reagan says to his national security team, a guy called Bud McFarlane, his national security advisor from October 1983, it'd be great if we could find some way of getting around that to give the Contras some money. And they do. So McFarlane, and a guy who works for him called Oliver North, who is described by one of his own colleagues

as 30 to 50% bullshit.

Bullshit and beefcake.

Exactly.

So they're both Vietnam veterans, actually, McFarlane, both Marines, McFarlane and North.

They decide, well, we're probably not bound by this congressional thing.

We can get money from our allies.

So they get money from the Saudis.

They, a Saudi royal family, give them some money, some others.

And they run this slightly shambolic operation to fly weapons to the Contras, which is illegal.

I mean, to give you a sense of the shambolic nature of it, at one point, the Sultan of Brunei gives them \$10 million.

But they give him the wrong bank account.

Have you seen this?

They gave him the wrong bank account.

So another identified anonymous Swiss businessman suddenly discovered that he had \$10 million transfer from the Sultan of Brunei.

Did they get it back?

Well, he, unbelievably, very public spirited, contacted the Swiss authorities and said, I've got all this money.

I think he's going to write back.

I mean, if I was him, I would be on an island.

I just run off with Oliver North's money.

So there's that.

That's an element.

That's quite bad because that's illegal.

That's running an illegal foreign policy.

What makes this so baroque is that at the same time, Bud McFarlane, national security advisor, he's contacted by the Israelis and the Israelis say to him, listen, we've identified what we think is a moderate faction in Iran.

So on the other side of the world, the Ayatollah's regime, a moderate faction that we think would be open to a deal with the Americans in the long run.

And they would be very interested in using their influence to free American hostages being held in Lebanon by Hezbollah because the Americans had made a disastrous under Reagan. The Marines had been blown up hadn't they by a car bomb? More than 200 in the car bomb in Lebanon.

And then they left again.

And as revenge, Hezbollah had started kidnapping Americans.

These go between and say, listen, these Iranians can probably use their influence.

However, the quid pro quo is they would like weapons to use in their war against Iraq, against Saddam Hussein.

Armed shipments in return, they'll release the hostages.

Now, the problem with this is the U.S. is sponsoring an arms embargo against the Iranian regime, who are their great enemies.

However, when they take this to Reagan,

Reagan's just had an operation.

So he's very groggy.

I think he's still compositious.

In August, 1985, he says, I think this is a great idea

because he's like Jimmy Carter before him.

He feels a real personal responsibility about the hostages.

He's desperate to get them home, absolutely obsessed by them.

And one of them was station chief in Beirut.

Yes.

Yeah.

But not all, I mean, some of them are sort of, there's a priest and there's journalists, all these kinds of things.

His more sort of sober advisor.

So George Schultz is Secretary of State, Kasper Weinberger, Secretary of Defense.

They say to him, this is an absolutely ludicrous and terrible idea.

You know, there's nothing, there's nothing good in this idea at all.

He says, no, go for it.

Do it.

So McFarlane and again, Oliver North, they get in touch with a go between.

He's a man called Manusha Gurbanefa.

The CIA described him in print, had written down,

he is an intelligence fabricator and a nuisance, a con artist.

He's the kind of person who'd send you an email saying he's just been robbed in the Philippines.

And can you send your bank details?

Please, please send your bank details.

Don't write down the wrong bank details and they'll go to the Swiss Bank.

They ignore this.

So they start to organize these armed shipments to Iran via the Israelis, anti-tank missiles.

As time goes on to 1985, beginning to turn into 1986,

the Iranians just say, yeah, we haven't quite got round to releasing the hostages,

but keep sending more of these arms, please.
So they send these arms, they start to have to use CIA front airlines to do it, which is very illegal.
Everything is sort of, has this air of incompetence.
So at one point they send them some Hawk missiles, which turn out to have the star of David on them.
So the Iranians say, well, those are useless because we can't use those.
You'll have to just send more.
And they're sort of in for a penny, in for a pound.
So North and Co, they keep sort of saying, well, we'll have to send more.
We're in for it now, just a few thousand more missiles and all this sort of stuff.
So by the turn of 1986, I mean, there's a plan.
They're going to send the Iranians 4,000 anti-tank missiles in a series of shipments.
And with each shipment, the Iranians will release a hostage.
Now, this is discussed in the White House.
So even though it's breaking the embargo, it's like a secret foreign policy that's going against your overt foreign policy.
Reagan is listening to all this.
Schultz and Weinberger keep saying, these are terrible, terrible ideas.
Why are we doing this?
And Reagan always says, do it.
And he says to Weinberger at one point, we're doing this for the hostages.
I don't want people to say I wasn't a big enough man to do everything in my power to kind of get the hostages back.
But it's about this point that Oliver North, full of bullshit as he's been described, has a brainwave.
Why don't we overcharge the Iranians for the arms?
Then I use the profits to give that money to the contras.
So he starts doing that and he's got \$12 million and he's funneling the profits to Nicaragua.
So it's illegal in two ways now.
So in Iran and in the Central American dimension.
Still, the hostages are not all being released in an absolutely ludicrous development.
In May, 1986, in an attempt to sort of break the deadlock, Bud McFarlane and Oliver North actually fly to Iran.
Is this when they take the Bible?
On fake Irish passports.
I mean, it's absolutely mind boggling that they thought they could get away with this.
They fly into Iran on Irish passports carrying two pistols, which are immediately confiscated by the Iranian security or customs people.
A chocolate cake that they had bought from a kosher bakery in Tel Aviv and a Bible personally inscribed by Ronald Reagan.
I mean, how they could think?
They turn up anyway with all this stuff.
The Iranians don't send anyone to meet them.

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It's completely obvious that they've been the victims of a terrible scam.
I mean, the Iranians do send junior people, but not senior people.
And after I think four days, they fly home.
Song's chocolate cake.
You see, they could very easily not have flown home.
I mean, they could have been taken hostage.
They could have been taken. So it's quite courageous, but mad.
Putting your head in the crocodile's mouth.
Yes. Putting a chocolate cake in a crocodile's mouth. Exactly.
Then in October, 1986, a plane is shot down over.
It's got a bit of watergate about this, hasn't it?
It really does.
Yeah, definitely.
Ludicrous incompetence.
A plane is shot down in Nicaragua.
The pilot is a man called Eugene Hassenfuss.
Again, slightly you couldn't make it up name.
I looked him up.
He was recently in trouble for exposing himself in a Walmart.
Was he?
Yeah. Anyway, he basically talks to the Nicaraguans who shot him down.
Oh, I'm working for the CIA.
At that point, the whole story breaks.
The Lebanese newspaper breaks the story about the Iranian trip.
Oliver North desperately tries to shred all the papers.
And this is all his secretary, Fawn Hall.
Fawn Hall, she stuffs them down her blouse.
I mean, Oliver North is the absolute spit of a plucky Marine
doing his bit for Uncle Sam in a Central American dictatorship.
And Fawn Hall not only has the name, but has the big hair
of a tight cast mid-1982.
She's kind of Melanie Griffiths and working girl.
She'd been in Dallas or Dynasty or Dynasty,
as our American listeners would call it.
She absolutely is.
So she's stuffing this stuff down her bra
or stuffing it into her boots, the papers.
North, they shred something like two,
I don't know, two square feet of documents or something.
But he forgets that he does the documents from his own filing
cabinet, but he forgets that they're just copies
and Fawn Hall has all the originals.
And he hasn't shredded those.
During investigations, everything goes wrong.

McFarlane actually tried to kill himself before his own testimony.

The boss of the CIA, Bill Casey, who's about 180,
has a seizure on his way to Capitol Hill to testify.

And then it turns out he's got a brain tumor that kills him.

And Reagan denies the whole thing.

I mean, Reagan undoubtedly,
and there's no two ways of putting it,
Reagan lies about it.

Reagan says, I didn't know anything about it.

Well, or so he ends up with Alzheimer's.

Yes.

And people have discussed, haven't they,
whether that is starting to kick in at this point,
whether he genuinely is forgetting these kind of details.

I mean, Reagan's never been a details man,

I suppose it's fair to say.

And he's also, we've talked a bit before, haven't we,
about how he creates his own truth.

Yeah.

Not unlike other residents of California,
of course, in their own time.

He creates his own truth in which he strongly believes.

I think, I mean, there's that denial that I mentioned at the beginning.

My heart, my best intentions still tell me that it's true,
but the facts and the evidence tell me it's not.

I mean, people are sort of saying to him,

Mr. President, you signed off on this.

You know, we have pieces of paper.

Now, he didn't know, I think, about the linkage between Iran
and there's no evidence that he knew about
that North was using the profits from one to fund the other.

But he had explicitly said,
do what you can to fund the Contras
and had explicitly given the go ahead
for the arms for hostages deal.

There's no doubt about that whatsoever.

So how does he avoid a Watergate situation then?

One, because there's already been Watergate.

So people, they want to bring down a second president.

They don't want to bring down a second president so soon.

Two, I think his personal, his administration
is anyway approaching the Fag end.

So in a way, he can kind of get away with it.

I think his own personal charm.

So he's more popular than Nixon.
Yeah, he hasn't got as many enemies maybe as Nixon.
People are itching to bring Nixon down
in a way they're not with Reagan.
And yet, I think, I mean, I always remember
when I first studied this as a student,
my then supervisor said to me,
Iran Contra was so much of a bigger deal than Watergate.
Yeah, sounds it.
Iran Contra is running two illegal foreign policies
and shoveling money to Iran.
Yeah. I mean, it's a massive deal.
Whereas Watergate was famously third rate burglary.
So a complex story, brilliantly told.
Well, I don't know about brilliantly told,
but told very quickly.
Brilliantly told.
So the other big aspect of Reagan's second term,
which shows him in a much better light,
is his dealings with Gorbachev.
And it's written in the stars.
This is going to go well.
Because before Reagan goes to see Gorbachev
for the first time in Geneva,
Nancy Reagan's astrologer does Gorbachev's horoscope.
Oh.
And it's all going to be fine.
John Quigley.
Yeah, John Quigley, yeah.
So that's good.
Oh, that's very good.
Well, Geneva actually, so he has four summits with Gorbachev.
Geneva, Reykjavik, Washington, Moscow.
And Reykjavik, he's staying in the former
British ambassador's house.
He has been in.
It's very bleak, apparently, Tom.
Very bleak.
And the British ambassador got rid of it
because he said it was haunted.
Haunted by the ghost of disarmament talks to come.
So Geneva, they have a meeting.
It's quite, it's quite frosty.
There's no deal.

However, they do have a bit of a rapport.
So they can talk to each other as human beings.
And they do argue about their respective systems.
Reagan's got all his kind of reading in human events
and readers' digest that he's been doing
by this stage for what, 30 years?
40 years?
So he's full of the communist system.
And he can't, he actually, at one point later on
in Washington, he tries out some of his anti-Russian jokes
on Gorbachev.
Yeah, in the Oval Office, right?
And there's massive embarrassment all around.
I mean, all the Americans say it was awful
and they wished the ground would swallow them up.
Swallow them up, yeah.
And because Gorbachev doesn't laugh at all.
Reykjavik is the key one.
Because although they don't get a deal in Reykjavik,
Gorbachev goes in with a massive,
massive offer of 50% cuts in their nuclear weapons
and get rid of all their intermediate weapons,
which are their sort of range of about 2,000 to 4,000 miles.
Unbelievably, Reagan then says,
well, why don't we get rid of all of them?
Why don't we get rid of them all?
And in the end, it's Star Wars.
That's the sticking point.
It's Star Wars that brings it down
because Reagan is so committed to Star Wars.
Gorbachev hates the thought of Star Wars.
Historians have different views about this,
about how much Reagan's defense spending put pressure
on the Russians.
There's no doubt that Gorbachev was genuinely concerned
about Star Wars.
I mean, actually, the irony is they spent all that money,
billions and billions,
but it never came to fruition.
But it's sort of psychologically,
I think it hammers home to the Soviet leadership
how backward they are.
By comparison, they can't possibly keep up.
But Reagan left Reykjavik devastated.

So if you think that Reagan was already,
if you think back to when we were talking before about Reagan,
how deep-seated his horror of nuclear weapons is
and this idealistic dream which actually horrifies
not just a lot of his staff.

But Mr. Satcher.

Yeah, all his allies.

Yeah.

What would have happened if he'd agreed, do you think?

I don't think he would have been allowed to agree, actually.

They would have rode it back.

I think so.

The president misspoke.

Yeah, people within his own administration

got in touch with Mr. Satcher and said,

I have terrible news.

He's offered to give away all that.

I mean, this genuinely happened.

They said he's offered to give away all our nuclear weapons.

You must use your influence.

Get on the phone to him.

You know, tell him.

For Christ's sake, don't go.

Because they then think,

because in Europe, people would say, well, we're undefended.

The Russians could walk in,

the Red Army could just come over the border at any point

and we have no defense.

Reagan is sort of devastated by this.

The interesting thing is how much credit

do you give to Reagan personally for the thawing?

The truth of the matter is almost any other U.S. president

would have had a much harder time

because they would have got such a beating

from the conservatives in the United States

as selling out.

But because Reagan has these anti-communist credentials,

he actually does get a bit of flack

from conservative periodicals who say,

unbelievable, Ronald Reagan of all people

has fallen for the communist lie.

But he's simultaneously playing good cop and bad cop, isn't he?

Yeah.

So he goes to Moscow and he kind of hangs out

and all that kind of stuff in Red Square.
Is that what he does, Tom?
Is that the noise?
That's exactly what he does.
And then he goes to Berlin
and says, Mr. Gorbachev, pull down that wall.
Tear down this wall.
Yeah.
It's Berlin first, then Moscow.
But you're right, he is doing that.
He's putting on the pressure.
All right, bad cop, good cop then.
Bad cop, good cop.
Exactly.
He's putting on the pressure.
They do sign a treaty in Washington, the INF Treaty.
They begin the process of strategic arms reduction.
And he goes to Moscow
and that really is such a psychological moment
because somebody says to him
as he's walking around in Red Square, greeting the crowds,
do you still think this is an evil empire, Mr. Reagan?
And he says, that was another time, another era.
I mean, personally, I would say it's not so much
that Reagan won the Cold War,
but that Gorbachev chose no longer to fight it.
I think that was the key to that.
But I think any other US president without Reagan's credentials
would have had a much harder time.
And I think the symbolism was all the greater
coming with Reagan.
And Reagan, having put so much rhetorical pressure
on the Soviet Union,
sending his first term and then before that,
before his presidency,
meant that it gave him the freedom to be able to strike a deal
and to be warm with Gorbachev
and to stroll around shaking hands in the arbat in Moscow.
For any other American president,
the backlash at home would have been massive,
but Reagan was able to get away with it.
So Dominic, we're approaching the end.
If we were to kind of draw up the account book,
Reagan ceases to be president.

He succeeded by George Herbert Bush,
who had been his vice president for the previous eight years.
George Herbert Walker Bush.
He retires to California.
He's diagnosed with Alzheimer's.
And he dies in 2004.
The impression I get is that in America,
even those who are very ideologically opposed to what he did,
I mean, he's not hated in the way that a lot of,
I mean, pretty much all the subsequent presidents are.
So I don't think people actually feel very strongly
about the first George Bush,
but Clinton, second Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden.
I mean, they've all been massively, massively polarizing figures.
Whereas Reagan has, I guess he was a very polarizing figure
in his own time, but even his opponents kind of,
they liked him.
They seem to have liked him.
Yeah.
So Tip O'Neill, you mentioned Tip O'Neill as a great example.
Tip O'Neill was the speaker of the house.
He was implacably opposed to everything Reagan stood for.
But Tip O'Neill says, doesn't he?
It's quoted in Bob Spitzer's book that we've referred to a few times.
Reagan would have made a brilliant monarch.
I mean, that is an important part of being a president, isn't it?
The monarchical role that he does seem to have done brilliantly.
But in terms of policy, perhaps setting the Cold War policy,
the rapprochement with Gorbachev aside,
his presidency seemed marked by a series of scandals, gaffes, failures,
massive deficits.
Yeah, that would be the harsh view.
A more rightly leaning economist, you might say,
the Reagan tax cuts established the foundations
from which the American economy then booms in the 80s and 90s.
I mean, I'm not going to pronounce a judgment on that,
because actually, I think that just comes down to personal political predilections
as much as anything.
I think Reagan definitely restores the prestige of the presidency
after the Nixon and of America.
And of America, I think, undoubtedly.
You know, you can't dismiss those things.
And most historians, even liberal historians who've written about this say,
you know, there's no doubt that he's a brilliant advertisement for the American brand.

But this goes back to what we've been saying all along, that the image, the brand, the roles that he's playing, the vibe, is a crucial part of what makes him an important and significant president. And that it is a mistake to sneer at that. I think it's definitely a mistake. Because actually, it's a very important part of being a president. It's definitely the idea that being a president, I mean, especially being a president rather than a prime minister, the idea that being a president is just a matter of pouring over briefing books and understanding the nitty-gritty of policy and, you know, line by line analysis of legislation. That that's all there is to it is a massive, massive misunderstanding. A lot of being a president is doing exactly what Reagan was doing when he worked at General Electric. It is going to the plants, making people feel good about themselves, selling them a few jokes, all that sort of stuff. I mean, FDR was very good at that. Reagan's hero. And FDR people said he's shallow. He doesn't understand the policy. Clinton was very good at that, too. Clinton was good at that. And Clinton definitely did understand the policy. But Clinton is more undisciplined than Reagan. Reagan had tremendous message discipline. When it worked, it worked very well. When he surrounded himself with pragmatic, bright people, he was an effective governor of California. And there are definitely things that he gets right. And the good example of that is handling the Soviet Union. The economy, I mean, there's no doubt that he left massive deficits. And his economic mantra, I mean, I would say, was in a way quite unconcernative because it just relied so much on borrowing. So one last question. It's in the 80s that the tech boom happens. Yeah. Really starts to kick in in California, which has been, you know, the underpinning for so much of American influence and economic power into the 21st century. That's happening in California where Reagan was governor. It happens under his presidency. Can he lay any claim to having played a role in that? Or is that just, you know, he is the surface for off and these deep kind of currents are moving beneath that surface for off. I definitely wouldn't give him credit for the tech boom necessarily. I would say, because the tech boom really begins in the 70s.

And it's not because of his governorship in California at all.

I mean, if you take Reagan out of the equation, the tech boom still happens.

But I suppose I think the three ways in which he's obviously consequential.

One is about, this will sound like a pejorative word and I don't mean it that way, but as an American nationalist, making Americans feel good about their country, asserting their strength, their role in the world, all that.

Number two is the relationship with Gorbachev.

I think that undoubtedly is really, really important.

And number three is he establishes a kind of, he is the Republican Roosevelt.

He becomes a kind of model, a dream figure.

So now all Republican candidates pay homage to Reagan.

They evoke Reagan.

Often without, I have to say, a massive understanding of his career and what he stood for, but he has become the touchstone.

And there are not many presidents of whom that's true.

And if, as some listeners may conclude at the end of this program, that's partly because he's a master of smoke and mirrors as much as of substance.

I mean...

Say what?

Yeah. We've done podcasts on everything from the Roman emperors, medieval kings, and smoke and mirrors has always been a huge part of it, hasn't it?

So, you know, Julius Caesar, who we did podcast about a month ago, would Julius Caesar have looked at Ronald Reagan and said, well, a shallow waste of space, or would he have said, he's good?

What do you think, Tom?

I think he would have respected his talents as his ability to speak to the people.

Yeah.

I think the Romans would undoubtedly have recognized in Reagan a familiar figure.

Don't you think?

Yeah, I think so.

All right. Well, on that note, Reagan, the Roman,

I hadn't expected that we were going to end up with that conclusion.

I thought after three episodes, Tom, something for you.

Yeah. Throw me a bone. Bless you.

I don't think we should end with us, though, should we?

I think we should end with the man himself.

The gipper.

With the gipper. I think we should end with the gipper.

And I think we have an authentic audio clip of the gipper.

His farewell address is January, 1989,

one of the most stirring and moving evocations of his faith in America.

So take it away, please, Ronald Reagan.

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life,

but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it.

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But in my mind, it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans,
windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace,
a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity.

And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors,
and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.

That's how I saw it, and see it still.

And how stands the city on this winter night?

More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was eight years ago.

But more than that.

After two hundred years, two centuries,
she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge,
and her glow has held steady no matter what storm.

And she's still a beacon.

She's still a magnet for all who must have freedom,
for all the pilgrims from all the lost places,
who hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

Goodbye. Goodbye.

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